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Brian McAllister Linn

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A Historical Perspective on Today's Recruiting Crisis

Brian McAllister Linn
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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the US Army's successive recruiting crises, identifies their consistent patterns and the efforts to resolve them, and makes three provocative arguments. First, there is a long-standing institutional tension between recruiting personnel for the combat arms and technical and administrative specialists. Second, many of today's talent management problems were first identified in a 1907 General Staff report and reiterated in subsequent studies. Third, the Army has pursued innovative recruitment strategies, but much of their success depended on factors outside the service's control. The essay concludes with four history-based recruiting lessons and an affirmation that the 2019 *Army People Strategy* recognizes the need for the Army to revise its talent management approach.

Keywords: recruitment, US Army history, personnel policy, talent management, *Army People Strategy*

Last year, the US Army missed its enlistment goals by 25 percent, prompting concerns that the service might shrink to 445,000 by the end of this year. The shortfalls are particularly serious in combat arms, most notably armor and infantry. Retired Lieutenant General David W. Barno, no alarmist, warned, "The all-volunteer force may finally have reached its breaking point."¹ The causes and consequences of this "recruiting crisis" have prompted vigorous and often vitriolic debate. Some pundits have accused the Army of excessive "wokeness" and others of excessive masculinity. But Army leadership recognizes that the recruitment crisis will not be resolved by partisan accusations or bumper-sticker solutions. It also accepts that dropping standards, a solution too often attempted in the past, is unacceptable if the service is to retain its qualitative superiority. The 2019 *Army People Strategy* makes this point in clear and unambiguous terms: "Human capabilities such as resiliency, critical thinking, comfort with

1. David Barno and Nora Benshael, "Addressing the U.S. Military Recruiting Crisis," War on the Rocks (website), March 10, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/addressing-the-u-s-military-recruiting-crisis/>. For a sample of cultural explanations, see Lolita C. Baldor, "Army Sees Safety, Not 'Wokeness,' as Top Recruiting Obstacle," AP News (website), February 12, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-politics-military-and-defense-race-ethnicity-6548adcb0fee590f3427771d1e1eeea7>; David McCormick and James Cunningham, "The Military Recruitment Crisis Is a Symptom of Cultural Rot," *Wall Street Journal* (website), April 14, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-military-recruitment-crisis-is-a-symptom-of-cultural-rot-american-exceptionalism-patriotism-health-c0f69bda>; and Thomas Spoehr, "The Rise of Wokeness in the Military," *Imprimis* 51, nos. 6-7 (June-July 2022), <https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/the-rise-of-wokeness-in-the-military/>. Except for specific citations, this essay is based on my recent book, *Real Soldiering: The US Army in the Aftermath of War, 1815–1980* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2023).

ambiguity, and the ability to accept prudent risk and adjust rapidly all define our profession.”²

Today, as always, the Army’s recruitment strategy must balance the often conflicting demands imposed by the immediate necessity of filling the most pressing vacancies, identifying those individuals with the potential for a military career, and predicting the service’s future personnel needs. It also has to resolve the perennial dilemma—going back over 200 years—that once the Army has met its immediate needs, the majority of volunteers (and draftees) try to avoid assignment to the combat arms. Finding the correct solutions to these challenges is no easy matter. To give just one example, an Army preparing for high-intensity ground operations in the Indo-Pacific in 2030 needs different talents than it would to police the borders and train allies. A final and fundamental question remains: can the Army’s self-identification with the combat infantry soldier coexist with its current role as one component of a doctrine—multidomain operations—that relies on military personnel who can apply the full spectrum of American technological supremacy?

From a historical perspective, today’s recruitment crisis has four commonalities dating back to the Army’s founding. First and foremost, recruitment problems are the norm, not the exception. Nostalgic references to a golden age where Americans were fit, patriotic, and motivated have been a staple of Army lore for well over a century, but they hardly reflect historical reality. For over 200 years, the peacetime service has suffered perennial recruiting crises, particularly in its “line” or combat branches. The circumstances contributing to positive enlistment levels—such as high unemployment and low wages in labor, enthusiasm for military life, and increased military pay and benefits—have been rare. Second, it is important not to confuse quantity with quality. Then and now, a 25 percent shortfall does not represent a shortage of applicants but a shortage of those with the potential to be effective soldiers. Even in the nineteenth century, when the service was often the employer of last resort and drew its rank-and-file from immigrants, unskilled laborers, and the urban poor, recruiters still rejected roughly three-quarters of the applicants. Third, in the past, a recruitment crisis represented both a source and symptom of the Army’s other personnel problems. Failing to acquire a sufficient number of talented enlistees often led to “skeleton” combat units and insufficient retention of quality enlisted personnel (as well as excessive resignation rates among junior officers). Finally, there has always been inherent tension between recruiting soldiers for immediate readiness—usually in the combat arms—and recruiting and retaining soldiers with essential technical-administrative

2. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *The Army People Strategy* (Washington, DC: HQDA, October 2019), 2, https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/the_army_people_strategy_2019_10_11_signed_final.pdf.

skills to sustain the force. In the past, Army recruitment has often had to secure the former by promising access to preparation for the latter.

The institutional memory of the nineteenth-century Old Army is one of dusty, tough, long-service cavalry troopers engaged in perpetual campaigning against hostiles. On paper, the service prioritized the combat arms, with over 21,000 of the 25,000 authorized enlisted personnel in either the infantry, artillery, or cavalry. In reality, these numbers were more aspirational than real: one 1897 survey estimated the Army ranks totaled barely 20,000 soldiers.³ Nor did they represent the nation's finest. As one long-time recruitment officer confessed, "it is a fact, not to be disguised or refuted, that want drives nine-tenth of our recruits into the army."⁴ As it does today, the Army struggled with the public perception that, as William Tecumseh Sherman explained to Helmuth von Moltke, whereas in Germany soldiering was a patriotic duty, in the United States the public's expectation was that the government "must hire and pay soldiers just as it does in public works and improvements."⁵ Indeed, as far as both politicians and citizens were concerned, enlisted personnel were better employed in public works than in training for war.

Almost from the Army's inception, a two-tier reward system characterized its enlisted ranks. Like all bureaucracies, the service rewarded those members with the skills necessary to sustain it: administrative and technical specialists in what were designated the "staff" bureaus, such as finance, ordnance, adjutant general, and so forth. Within the combat, or "line," units, the Army's existential mission was continental defense. Thus, the most skilled and valued workforce was more likely to be found not on the frontier but in the coastal fortifications manning the artillery. Even in the West, the incessant demands of post maintenance required each company to find carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, farriers, and so forth, within its ranks. Exempt from many drill and guard duties, they spent the majority of their time in uniform plying their trades. Indeed, a persistent problem was tradesmen-soldiers refusing promotion because noncommissioned officer rank would reduce their pay and privileges.

3. Raoul Dupuy, "A Study of the Cavalry of the United States of America," *Journal of the U.S. Cavalry Association* 12, no. 49 (March 1899): 68–92. On military personnel, see Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784–1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

4. Charles B. Hall, "Recruits and Recruiting," *United Service* 2 (July 1889): 26–27.

5. William Tecumseh Sherman, marginalia in Francis Vinton Greene, "The Important Improvements in the Art of War during the Past Twenty Years and Their Probable Effect on Future Military Operations," *Journal of the Military Service Institution* 4, no. 13 (1883): 2–4, Francis Vinton Greene Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

The post-Spanish American War reforms initiated by Secretary of War Elihu Root (1899–1904) have long been credited as decisive steps toward an Army prepared for modern war against a rival great power. In reality, they played a major role in one of the Army’s worst recruiting crises in its long history. Root dramatically increased the Army’s size, but he even more dramatically increased its responsibilities. While annually deploying roughly a quarter of its troops overseas, it now had to build and maintain the new harbor defenses, provide advisers to the National Guard, and sustain a massive schooling system. In a decade of high wages and low unemployment, the Army could not attract a sufficient number of qualified recruits. Just two years after Root left office, his successor bluntly informed Congress, “this Army that we now have is nothing but a skeleton army.”⁶ The following year, the combat arms could muster only 43,000 of their authorized strength of 63,000.

The perpetual recruitment crisis prompted the Acting Secretary of War to direct a General Staff officer, Johnson Hagood, to conduct the first systematic study of Army recruitment and retention. Published as a pamphlet in 1907, his findings still resonate over a century later. Dismissing romantic views of past patriotism, Hagood concluded:

In the first place, the American soldier in time of peace is very much like every other type of American citizen . . . he becomes a soldier, and he remains a soldier, for what he can get out of it. Just as soon as he decides that he can get more out of civil life than he can out of the Army, then he is going to refuse to enlist or to reenlist.⁷

His findings emphasized the Army’s difficulty with attracting and retaining personnel with the occupational skills most valued in the civilian marketplace. Perhaps more troubling, he illustrated the glaring disparities between the nonspecialist military and civilian wages: one janitor now made six times what he did as a private. Hagood’s report revealed how the recruiting crisis had hollowed out the Army’s ranks. On the first page was a photograph of an infantry company with an authorized strength of 65 that could muster only nine men for a mandated route march.⁸

6. *Hearings before the Committee on Military Affairs of the United States Senate on the Army Appropriation Bill for the Fiscal Year 1906-7*, 59th Cong. (1906), 39.

7. Johnson Hagood, *Circular Relative to Pay of Officers and Enlisted Men of the Army* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1907), 8.

8. Hagood, *Circular*, 1, 99.

In response to the manpower crisis, the Army made several innovations. It doubled the number of recruiters, increased advertising and publicity, and created the General Recruiting Service to consolidate enlistment, basic training, and assignment. Bolstered by the evidence presented in Hagood and others' studies, and taking advantage of sustained media support, the Army convinced Congress to raise pay across the ranks. Much to the frustration of those in the combat arms, the new pay scale greatly favored technical skills. A master gunner in the coastal artillery was paid the equivalent of a regimental sergeant major in the infantry, and a master electrician was paid well over twice as much. Indeed, coastal artillery was so valuable it was allocated a number of comparatively well-paid specialist ratings denied to other, less technical combat branches. Not surprisingly, the most technically inclined and ambitious career soldiers concentrated there, ensuring that other branches had to train their requirement of semiskilled craftsmen themselves to keep their posts and units going. Helped by the century's first financial meltdown—the Panic of 1907—the Army managed to recruit up to its requirements by 1909. But as economic prosperity returned, the Army once again struggled to meet its enlisted recruiting goals, a struggle compounded by 25 percent annual turnover, a 60 percent decline in reenlistments, and a desertion rate over 20 percent.⁹

The decade after World War I brought persistent recruiting problems. Overruling senior leadership's advice, Secretary of War Newton D. Baker and Congress declared the peacetime Army would become the school of the nation. The service was compelled to accept the enlistment of illiterates and short-service recruits, even as recruitment propaganda promised young men ample reliable pay, comfortable quarters, schooling, and a trade that would guarantee them civilian employment. The initial results were encouraging: over 70,000 men enlisted between March and June 1919. But the following year, despite a massive advertising campaign and strong public support from politicians, business, and labor, the Army enlisted fewer than 24,000 men and continued to lose personnel faster than it could replace them. Compounding the Army's difficulties, Congress slashed funding for schooling and drastically cut personnel. Those who had enlisted and were not selected for the promised technical schools felt betrayed. That most were housed in squalid barracks, poorly fed, harshly treated, and relegated to poorly paid menial labor only increased their demoralization. As the economy boomed in the Roaring Twenties, the Army found it harder and harder to acquire and retain sufficient talent. Until the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, the service averaged a 40 percent annual

9. Harrison Summers Kerrick, "Our Military Resources vs. Our Military Power—National Assurance vs. National Insurance," *Journal of the Military Service Institution* 54, no. 189 (May-June 1914): 293–316; and "A Study of Desertion," 1920, US Army Heritage and Educational Center (USAHEC), Carlisle, PA.

turnover in the ranks, requiring it to secure 47,000 enlistments annually to maintain its 115,000 enlisted authorization.¹⁰

The Army's perennial recruitment problems in the 1920s were compounded by increasing demands for technical specialization in its troops. Although Army doctrine and leaders emphasized the importance of the infantry-artillery warfighting team that had triumphed on the Western Front, the service's talent management policies told a very different story. As in previous peacetime eras, to attract and retain high-quality technical specialists, the Army promised vocational training, promotion to higher rank, and entitlements. Both external and internal pressure to prioritize aviation unbalanced the service's reward structure. By the end of the decade, the Air Corps' enlisted ranks numbered 12,034 to the infantry's 41,259. But the new combat branch boasted 195 master sergeants to the infantry's 150, 1,029 staff sergeants to the infantry's 318, 225 technical sergeants to the infantry's 57, and 146 first-class and 289 second-class specialists to the infantry's 25 and 35.¹¹

The first years after the end of World War II brought one of the worst recruiting crises in Army history. Barely half a year after Japan's surrender, the service secretary warned,

Our new Army, as distinguished from the pre-war force, must be an Army of trained technicians competent to handle complicated mechanical equipment. To recruit such an army we must compete on more equal terms with business and industry. If we are unable to do so, we will be forced to take leftovers. . . . Already many of our recruits are below the standard that should be set, we dare not reject them for fear that better men will not be forthcoming.¹²

In 1949, 8th Army Headquarters reported a shocking 98 percent of its replacements had tested below the acceptable Army standard for intelligence. With a line worker in an auto factory making over twice a private's pay and much of the citizenry all too aware of the dangers of combat service, the service's recruiting campaign emphasized occupational training, employment security, steady pay, benefits, and early retirement—not fighting. Enlistees—very few of them veterans—subscribed to the Army's message. One 1948 survey found that,

10. Harry G. Dowdall, "Modern Recruiting—A Problem," *Infantry Journal* 36 (June 1930): 616–25; E. N. Woodbury, "Morale: Improving the Standard of the Enlisted Many," February 28, 1931, USAHEC; and Robert K. Griffith Jr., *Men Wanted for the U.S. Army: America's Experience with an All-Volunteer Army between the World Wars* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).

11. *Report of the Secretary of War, 1930* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1930), 312–13.

12. Robert P. Patterson to President, Sub: Increase in Pay for the Armed Forces, February 18, 1946, in Strategy and the Army Files, Folder 2, Box 1, Record Group 319, National Archives 2, College Park, MD.

as in the 1907 study, the great majority enlisted for personal improvement, not for any desire for a military life.¹³

Despite the Army's wish to return to an all-volunteer force—albeit one with far greater education and technical skills—the years immediately following World War II produced so few quality volunteers it was repeatedly forced to ask that Selective Service be extended. Peacetime conscription guaranteed the Army annual access to a cross section of young American males, from the barely functional to the college graduate. They entered a service busily transforming itself for the challenges of atomic war, a mission that required far greater levels of education and occupational skill than its predecessor. Between the immediate postwar and 1963, the number of Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) grew from barely 50 to over 400, much of the expansion due to requirements for specialists in rapidly evolving fields such as missiles, computers, electronics, and so forth.

Fortunately for the Army, conscription ensured that many—if not enough—enlistees entered the service with the education or occupational background to fulfill its need for specialists. Unfortunately, conscription did not solve other perennial problems. Personnel churn guaranteed perpetual instability: every three years, the Army replaced virtually all its privates and corporals. As before, the Army had to funnel a high proportion of its most educated and technically skilled soldiers into elite units. In the 1950s, perhaps the most elite was Army Air Defense Command (ARADCOM), responsible for the missile bases guarding American cities. Army Air Defense Command administered its own recruitment program, enticing the best and brightest with promises of education, high-tech training, and comfortable stateside billets. The rest of the Army rediscovered that the more demanding a soldier's technical specialty, and the more time the Army had invested in his training, the less likely he was to extend his service. The service did retain 80 percent of its career sergeants—many less educated than the privates in their companies—and attracted a large number of semiskilled food processors and truck drivers. But it could not retain over a tenth of its specialists in electronics and sometimes ran a 90 percent deficit in top administrative personnel.¹⁴

As the Army withdrew from Vietnam, it endured what may have been its worst manpower crisis. Bowing to antiwar sentiment, in the summer

13. *Attitudes of New Recruits in the Army*, Report 50-314Ra, US Army, Information and Education Division, Troop Attitude Research Branch, January 15, 1948, Box 1006, Entry 93, Record Group 330, National Archives, College Park, MD.

14. On the post-World War II Army, see Brian McAllister Linn, *Elvis's Army: Cold War GI's and the Atomic Battlefield* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). On technical specialties, see Harold Wool, *The Military Specialist: Skilled Manpower and the Armed Forces* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), 33–38.

of 1970, President Richard Nixon drastically cut Selective Service call-ups. The effect was immediate. The Army required 7,000 men per month for the combat arms and was lucky to get 400 volunteers; draftees provided the rest. By fall, the 82nd Airborne, the Army's sole remaining rapid response force, had to line out one of its three brigades to provide troops for Vietnam. The following year, the draft ended, and Congress suddenly decided to reduce enlisted strength by 50,000, accelerating personnel turmoil. Not only did the Army suffer a 25 percent cut in less than two years, but with the end of the draft, it also lost its primary enlistment incentive. The results were immediate: between February and March 1971, the number of volunteers dropped by 65 percent. One visitor to 7th Army discovered that the typical armored company could operate only 10 of its 17 tanks, and on any given day only a dozen of its 100 soldiers were available for training.¹⁵ Any assessment of the early success of the all-volunteer Army must take into consideration the prolonged crisis of the previous years.

Beginning in mid-1971, the Army's junior enlisted force transitioned from one drawn primarily from conscripts to one relying on volunteers. A combination of unprecedented factors—personnel cuts, pay raises, massive recruiting budgets, better housing, innovative local enlistment campaigns, enlistment options, educational benefits, high youth unemployment, and above all, the withdrawal from Vietnam—generated immediate positive results. The primary beneficiary was the combat arms. Encouraged by high bonuses and promises of less “chickenshit” regulations, the number of combat arms enlistments jumped from barely 3,000 in 1970 to almost 29,000 a year later.¹⁶

Unfortunately, this early success concealed a variety of fundamental misassumptions about the all-volunteer force that would soon contribute to yet another recruiting crisis. Perhaps the most egregious mistake was the economists' argument that soldiers, like other workers, sought to maximize their value on the job market. If the armed forces provided funding and benefits comparable to or better than the civilian sector's, a sufficient number of skilled or trainable young people would enlist and make the service a career. However rational this approach appeared to academics, it created the demoralizing perspective both inside and outside the armed forces that the nation placed no value on patriotism, service, esprit de corps,

15. Lloyd Norman, “Turbulence and Army Readiness,” *Army* 21, no. 7 (July 1971): 10–14; and Robert K. Griffith Jr., *The U.S. Army's Transition to the All-Volunteer Force, 1968–1974* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1997).

16. L. James Binder, “Front and Center: Who Is Joining Who? Snipe at Those Slogan-Makers, but They Know the Territory,” *Army* 22, no. 4 (April 1972): 6.

or other intangibles. The Army's recruitment slogans, including the notorious "Today's Army Wants to Join You," only confirmed this perception.¹⁷

By the end of 1973, the fallacies of both economic arguments and of the idea that initial recruiting success could be maintained were obvious. Despite high bonuses and fringe benefits, the number of high school graduate enlistees fell far below the target goal, with the combat arms experiencing a 38 percent shortfall. The promised pay and benefits did not keep up with rampaging inflation, nor could the service construct decent housing for career personnel. The service endured a number of recruiting scandals that, in one instance, forced it to discharge 16 percent of its enlistees. Disciplinary and racial tensions traumatized the ranks: some young men volunteered because they believed they could secure cheaper drugs in Europe. When in 1974 Congress insisted that over half of new enlistees be high school graduates and no more than 18 percent from the lowest testing range, the service not only missed its recruiting goal by 20,000 but also had to grant almost 50,000 early discharges. Two years later, Congress cut educational benefits, thus removing a prime incentive for enlistment, and the service continued to suffer recruiting shortages. Under enormous pressure to produce results, recruiters continued to accept far too many who were dropouts, physically unfit, or socially maladjusted.

The Army's cascading personnel problems led Chief of Staff Frederick C. Weyand to commission an extensive study of first enlistment recruitment and retention. Completed in early 1976, its fundamental conclusion replicated Hagood's of 70 years earlier: "[Young people] join the Army for their own purposes—job training, or self-development, or whatever—and not out of enthusiasm for the Army itself. They tend to see the Army as a temporary price they have to pay to accomplish these purposes."¹⁸ Following the logic of those economists who had first proposed abolishing the draft, young people avoided enlisting in the combat arms because it provided the least benefits in terms of both immediate and future occupational skills. By the later part of the decade, the Army was compelled to transfer soldiers into its fighting formations involuntarily. In 1976, it announced a mandatory reclassification of 14,000 noncommissioned officers into combat arms MOSs.

17. *Department of the Army Historical Report FY 72*, 58, 76. On the post-Vietnam Army, see Beth Bailey, *America's Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009) and Beth Bailey, *An Army Afire: How the US Army Confronted Its Racial Crisis in the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

18. "Attitudes and Motivations of First Termers toward Reenlistment," January 1976, Box 11A, Frederick C. Weyand Papers, USAHEC.

In fiscal year 1980, one out of every three reenlistees in the combat arms had been transferred from their original MOS.¹⁹

By the end of the decade, the future of the all-volunteer force was so dubious that Army Chief of Staff Edward C. “Shy” Meyer warned the nation was fielding a “hollow” force.²⁰ In 1979, the Army had its worst recruiting crisis since the end of World War II. It missed its quota by more than 10 percent, despite lowering the minimum for testing scores, educational requirements, physical fitness, and moral standards and extending eligibility to 17-year-olds. By 1980, barely 41 percent of enlisted personnel had a high school diploma. Compounding these problems, two scandals broke. The first was that the Army’s primary talent assessment standard—the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery—was so inaccurate (or *misnormed*) as to be useless. The Army, like all the armed forces, had accepted thousands of unqualified personnel. The second revelation was widespread abuse in Recruiting Command: one investigation of a random sample of recruits found that almost 40 percent had illegally enlisted.

Set against these enormous recruiting problems of the 1970s, the Army’s revival in the 1980s is an inspirational redemption tale exemplified by the highly successful “Be All You Can Be” commercial. But three cautions should be noted. First, the Army’s success was still due to the same inducements in education, training, living conditions, and so forth promised the original recruits of the all-volunteer force—and then withdrawn. Second, outside pressures—enormous and ultimately unsustainable defense budgets, economic recession, and high youth unemployment—drove young Americans into uniform as much as rediscovered patriotism. Three, much of the perceived success of the 1980s revival was based not on a standard today’s officers would be comfortable with but only in comparison to how bad things had been in the 1970s.

Today, it is tempting to look back with nostalgia to what, in memory, was the highly trained, highly motivated, combat-ready Desert Storm Army. But as early as 1993, Chief of Staff Gordon R. Sullivan warned the service was having a harder time acquiring and retaining talent. By the end of the decade, the Army was missing its recruitment and retention goals, run ragged by constant deployments, getting by with deteriorating materiel, and profoundly questioning its purpose. As today, most of these generally welcome factors—economic prosperity, high employment, and a lack of perceived national

19. “The Bulletin Board: Army Will Retrain 14,000 NCOs to Fill Combat Unit Slots,” *Army* 26 (January 1976): 10. For additional information on re-enlistees being moved from their original MOSs, see *Commanders Call*, Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA Pam) 360-870 (September-October 1982).

20. On the “hollow army” debate, see Frank L. Jones, *A “Hollow Army” Reappraised: President Carter, Defense Budgets, and the Politics of Military Readiness* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012).

security threats—were outside the service’s control, but some, including a series of sexual harassment scandals, were the service’s responsibility.

Beyond the discouraging statistics predicting an imminent recruitment crisis, some senior leaders subscribed to the belief that the post–Cold War Army was getting too “soft.” It needed to recruit those seeking membership in a warrior band rather than transitory employees acquiring skills to sell in the marketplace. As today, the cultural emphasis on “warriorism” was contradicted by the service’s increasing interest in a future war scenario of full-spectrum dominance only possible with access to talent capable of mastering the latest electronic, communication, information, and other high-tech systems.²¹

This very brief survey of previous Army recruitment crises indicates several lessons worthy of consideration by those concerned about today’s personnel problems. First and foremost, the current recruitment crisis is nothing new. Indeed, it would be fair to say that since the beginning of the twentieth century, the peacetime volunteer Army has been in a crisis more often than not. Tempting as it is to blame “wokeness,” slacker mentality, Generation Z, or some other nebulous reason, the basic fact remains—as Hagood pointed out almost 120 years ago—that average recruits are very much like average Americans. They join the service for individual reasons, most based on expectations of personal benefit. Whether they are happy or unhappy, engaged or passing time, one-timers or career depends on the Army. As Hagood’s report implicitly recognized, and as later reports have confirmed, there is a great difference between job satisfaction—which an individual believes may be achieved in applying their trade—and job engagement, in which an individual believes their occupational skills can only be appreciated within a particular organization. For the Army, which lacks the flexibility and pay scales to compete with civilian employers in job satisfaction, it is crucial to emphasize job engagement.

A second conclusion is that while the service may portray its members as warriors, in practice it has recognized the necessity of accessing and retaining skilled labor. Almost from the Army’s beginning, these twin demands have created a de facto two-tier talent management system, with higher ranks, privileges, and pay for technical and administrative specialists. Until the Army can resolve the inherent contradiction of a recruitment campaign with the slogan “Warriors Wanted” while offering \$5,000 enlistment bonuses to potential cavalry scouts and \$40,000 bonuses to satellite communications systems operators, this two-tier system will continue to exist.²² If the Army

21. On the 1990s force, see David Fitzgerald, *Uncertain Warriors: The United States Army between the Cold War and the War on Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

22. US Army, “Bonuses,” Army (website), n.d., accessed July 18, 2017, <https://www.goarmy.com/benefits/money/bonuses-earning-extra-money.html>.

can resolve its cultural emphasis on what warriors should look like with historical realities, it can acknowledge that not all—or even the majority—of active personnel need to fit an ideal physical standard. Could Audie Murphy have passed the 2019 Army Combat Fitness Test? As a corollary, if the Army truly wants combat soldiers, their pay and benefits need to be close approximations to those of its specialists. Any young American worth wearing the uniform can understand the message sent by grossly disproportional bonuses.

A third conclusion is that both a recruiting crisis and its resolution are often determined by factors outside the Army's means of control: the state of the economy, youth employment, public attitudes, recruitment budgets, pay and benefits, deployments, and so on. This reality does not mean that the Army should not seek to improve those factors that it does control. Historic enlisted gripes that date back two centuries—abusive or incompetent leadership, misassignment, renegeing on promised training or leave, make-work projects, and using soldiers as laborers—all contribute not only to poor retention but also to occurrences where, once released, soldiers will discourage other potential enlistees. But it does mean that the Army leadership should be cautious about blaming individuals and organizations for problems that have not been resolved for over 200 years.

A final conclusion is more optimistic. While still giving primacy to the Army's mission as the world's premier combat force, the *Army People Strategy* acknowledges that the service must shift its personnel policies from a system designed to fit a generic MOS to the correct "box" to one that effectively manages individual talents. The *Army People Strategy* highlights the diversity of threats, ranging from ground combat to cyber, and prioritizes "knowledge workers" who "add value and increase productivity through creative thinking and innovation."²³ It appreciates that in today's market economy, it is the Army's task to provide not just job satisfaction—which is readily transferable to another workplace—but personal fulfillment found only in uniform. If successfully implemented—and not co-opted by those seeking to build a mythical warrior—this new approach may succeed in transforming recruits who enlist for personal benefit into soldiers who become "all they can be" in the Army.

23. HQDA, *Army People Strategy*, 3.

Brian McAllister Linn

Brian McAllister Linn is a professor of history and the Ralph R. Thomas Class of 1921 Professor in Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University. He was the Harold K. Johnson Visiting Professor of History at the US Army War College and is the author of six books on American military history, including *Real Soldiering: The US Army in the Aftermath of War, 1815–1980* (University Press of Kansas, 2023).

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